



## Chuck Kleinhans 1942-2017: a personal memoir and a tribute

by [Thomas Waugh](#)

*Jump Cut* co-founder/co-editor-publisher Chuck Kleinhans, one of the most influential film scholars and activists of the era of the New Left and onwards, died suddenly of heart failure on December 14 in Eugene Oregon. The 43 year-old magazine, in print since 1974 and online since 2001, will continue to address “contemporary media” with all its well-known commitment, passion and astute analytic vision.



Chuck Kleinhans and Tom Waugh at an early Visible Evidence documentary film conference.



Northwestern University, Radio-Television-Film Department.

Generations of film scholars, historians, activists and critics lost a devoted mentor and astute reader-editor. Chuck was Associate Professor Emeritus in the Radio/Television/Film Department, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, where he served from 1977 to 2009. The courses he taught over those decades say much: introductory courses in microcomputer graphics, film and video making, media literacy, popular culture; advanced courses in production aesthetics, experimental and documentary film and video, Hollywood cinema; and graduate courses in film/tv theory, mass culture theory, digital culture, cross-cultural media. Forty-three Northwestern doctoral graduates’ debt to him is immeasurable.

A connoisseur of documentary and the avant-garde and sexual representation and everything in between, local and global, Chuck was a legendary piercer of bullshit and complacency in academia and on the left and everywhere else, a brilliant identifier of the exact political and artistic issues at stake in every film and piece of

film scholarship.

Thousands of film scholars of my generation and younger have their Chuck memories, and I'm sure everyone sees theirs as symbolic of Chuck's legacy as I do mine. If I share several of mine in this tribute, I hope this personal memoir of a friend will speak for much of what Chuck achieved and what he meant to so many others. Every eulogy is a record of a relationship, but to balance my personal indulgence I also incorporate some very very long excerpts from Chuck's own writing, swelling up to occupying a full half of this text, simply in the spirit of allowing his inimitable and unforgettable voice to be the ultimate presiding presence herein. This is not meant to serve as the definitive "best of," but hopefully as the first of many best-of's (all the more since two of the Kleinhans articles I excerpt are not available online).

I had discovered *Jump Cut* by accident the summer I was working in the library periodicals section of the mediocre Ivy League university where I was doing my graduate degrees in film studies and itching for an elusive Marxist methodology for my new discipline. This was 1974 and Shirley Temple was on the cover of the new newsprint tabloid rag that flopped onto my desk: inside was an astute analysis of class in Hollywood cinemas. I was converted immediately! This was exactly what was missing in my program that was entirely shaped by an apolitical fixation on auteur and art cinemas, and I became JC's number one fan.

The honeymoon was jarred a few issues later however. I had been inching my way out of the closet and wondering what a materialist gay film studies would look like when suddenly I saw *JC* 4's headline for its ideological critique of Clint Eastwood/Michael Cimino's latest homosocial romance *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*: "Tightass and Cocksucker." Excuse me? I fired off a snailmail (that was all we had in 1974) to *Jump Cut* not so gently asking where a straight lefty mag got off using ambiguous if not homophobic epithets as a header for a fagbaiting article on a male-bonding genre flic that itself had a few too many ambiguities for its own good (I couldn't tell which was worse the film or the article).[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Chuck had not been born yesterday and sniffed fresh meat: in his semi-apologetic response he unapologetically recruited me to write for the magazine. What followed was my first ever scholarly publication, a recycled term paper on Emile de Antonio, and more importantly in 1977 "*Who Are We? A Very Natural Thing, The Naked Civil Servant: Films by Gays for Gays.*"

The latter not only blew my cover after one year in my new tenure-track job but also raised important issues about the relationship of the gay left and straight left. Chuck (and Julia and third co-editor John Hess) supported and welcomed the new writer and more importantly the magazine's solidarity with the politics of sexuality and sexual minority cultural activism. I have often described Chuck and Julia's role in my work as semi-mentorship, although they were only slightly older than me, and that's when it all started: I had never experienced solidarity on the part of straight leftists—not to mention straight feminists—and the lessons about solidarity, about what later would be called intersectionality, and about criticism and self-criticism on the left came fast and furious.

My second anecdote comes a few years later, just after I had defended my PhD on serial heterosexual communist documentarist Joris Ivens, snagged tenure and was looking for a new research direction, hopefully enlisting the new momentum in gay and lesbian film studies. Chuck had done his PhD at Indiana University and was familiar with the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, periodically dropping in on research visits. I don't remember which came first but he shared with me two amazing discoveries: a hoard of vintage black-and-white hetero shoe-fetish cheesecake photos, and a 16mm silent short fiction film from the mid-fifties narrating a male-male love story in New Jersey and Manhattan, beautifully shot in black and white. The latter was anonymous but somehow we soon figured out it was by the Oscar-winning French



*Jump Cut* co-founders and co-editors, John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans.



Young self-portrait.



Young self-portrait.



Self-portrait.



Longtime Chicago resident, from childhood on.



Chicago years.



documentarist François Reichenbach, who had obviously networked with the American gay underground and Dr. Kinsey on his filmmaking excursions to the U.S. before the latter's death in 1956. These finds were clearly the tip of the iceberg, and Chuck did not even have to tell me to get my ass down to Kinsey for I had quickly got a grant and was already halfway there.... I guess ultimately I have Chuck to thank for the major new thrust of my career, explorations of sexual representation and pornography, their histories and politics.

It was the heady summer of 1982, the year of the Barnard Conference on sexuality and feminism, the paradigm-shifting "Sex Issue" of the "bad girl" feminist rag *Heresies*, and as if in rebuttal the "good girl" Canadian documentary *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography*. Meanwhile my friends and editors at the Toronto community magazine *Body Politic* were still on trial for obscenity. The porn wars were thus upon us and the ten-years-old *Jump Cut* was well positioned to take the plunge, the only film magazine to figure it out instantly, to talk with complexity, toughness and solidarity about the proliferating culture of the sexual revolution as it was lurching towards the digital era. I still use Chuck and Julia's editorial on sexual representation from the pioneering 1985 special issue on porn in my teaching more than thirty years later and here is a rather large taste:

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... critiques of visual pornography too often rest on a naive and misleading understanding of the photographic/ electronic image. Too often the critique of sexual imagery assumes that such images simply and directly reproduce reality. Yet the major theoretical and practical development of image analysis in the past two decades has undermined the notion that an unmediated reality can be simply duplicated by image technology. Rather, realism itself is highly conventional, as are the ways that people understand images; i.e., such an understanding is highly socially constructed. Certainly images utilize imitation. But the nature of reproduction, media of reproduction, is such that reality — the tangible and social world as it exists — comes to us only via the media, which have a primary artificial and thus cultural nature. That's what's implied in the very word "image." We will find no simple "negative image" of women, nor any simple and universal "positive" one. Images are always understood in context and through the filter of the receiver's consciousness.

...Most crucially, in the debates around pornography, distinctions are often made between a good and acceptable "erotica" and an evil and pernicious "pornography," yet such distinctions rest on the assumption that an image would have an inherent meaning. On closer inspection, this too is "interpretation," and it rests on a culturally and subjectively developed sense of good taste and aesthetic or moral education. Projections about distinctions between erotica and pornography are often put forth with no awareness at all of the ethnocentric, class, and race bias that they exhibit.

....Another major problem occurs when critiques of pornography do not distinguish between the realm of fiction, fantasy, and imagination, on the one hand, and the fact of representation, on the other. In this, the feminist critique tends to echo the right wing in the opposition to porn—that showing sexuality is itself the problem. While anti-porn feminists may allow for some sexually explicit material, their analysis is often strongly normative. Politically correct sexuality can be shown, but certain behaviors and minority tastes are definitely beyond the acceptable. Robin Morgan has gone so far as to argue that not only can women change their basic fantasy structures by an act of will, but that they are obligated to do so to remain feminists: if fantasies are reactionary, change them. While it may well be that some women (and men) can and do change their basic sexual fantasies, it has yet to be shown how the vast majority of people can do so.

The deep power of much art, from fictional narration to visual representation, in print and in performance and on the screen, lies precisely in connecting with subconscious patterns of feeling and thinking. People initially form these patterns in infancy and childhood, and however much they later modify and transform their personality, most subconscious patterns are not completely transcended. Thus people commonly find pleasure in what they themselves may regard as politically

Office at Northwestern.



Early days in Chicago.

incorrect fantasies. But this is part of the nature of fantasy and the artistic use of it. Fantasy is precisely what people desire but do not necessarily want to act on. It is an imaginative substitution and not necessarily a model for overt behavior. Morgan's famous slogan, 'Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice,' assumes a cause and effect relation which is speculative at best. Yes, some rapists use pornography (which alone doesn't prove cause), but not all men (and certainly not the majority) who use pornography become rapists. The slogan implies a strategy: eliminate pornography and you will eliminate rape. Yet that strategy seems to substitute attacking the symptom for confronting the problem.

The evolution of the feminist anti-pornography movement has been to seek state censorship. Earlier protests used direct action, such as vandalizing objectionable billboards, informational leafleting, and picketing specific films. As women have turned to a strategy of pressuring for local censorship ordinances, they have been willing in some cases to form alliances with the right, such as the Moral Majority in Indianapolis. In doing so, the feminist anti-porn movement seems to have lost an understanding of how and why censorship has been used by the right, and also by the capitalist state. It seems increasingly to support a very narrow view of acceptable sexuality and acceptable representations of sexuality in imaginative forms. And it seems deeply confused about the actual history of sexual representation and censorship.[2]

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I suspect Julia remembers which turn of phrase or idea came from which co-writer, but I for the life of me can't separate the two voices: this is collaborative writing at its most productive, most insightful and most seamless... and most political!



Comrade lovers.

Meanwhile I had not abandoned my commitment to committed documentary, and I strong-armed Chuck, Julia and John to all contribute individual chapters to my 1984 anthology *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. All three pieces were core to the volume and have aged extremely well. Chuck's title says it all: "Forms, Politics, Makers and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary." I had never before encountered such tough talk and lucid truth-telling:

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Radical documentary in all its media—still and moving image, audio, verbal and written, etc.—has always had at least two basic inescapable functions. Some

examples and documentary genres almost exclusively use these two functions: witnessing and affecting. To witness is to say this happened, look at this—this was a concentration camp, these people are demonstrating for their rights, this is what napalm does to children, these are American cluster bombs being used against noncombatant civilians, etc. Given the overt censorships, the covert self-censorship, and the deliberate lies propagated by the dominant order, clearly the simple use of images as witness is itself often radical. To affect is to move: let this touch you, let this shock you or surprise you, make you weep or scream with anger, let this affect your heart, your emotions, your unconsciousness, your body, let this move you to act, to resist, and to change. This is always the other function of documentary, even when presented in a deliberate cool or rational style....

Usually, makers and producers justify [their “realist” “formalism”] by saying you have to use familiar forms to reach a large audience and that more experimental forms cannot be used because people do not understand them. It’s a Lawrence Welk approach that ignores the actual nature of visual literacy in our Atari culture. A four-year-old with access to television comes to symbolic consciousness both visually and verbally while immersed in complex image/sound combinations; the child does so while watching commercials as well as many of the animated and documentary segments of children’s shows. To make films that will reach people “where they are at,” in media culture now means to use familiar forms such as rapid montage editing, nontraditional cutting, layered sound and images, and metaphoric and symbolic images. For better or worse, Music Television represents the audio-visual norms of most adolescents today....

The standards for a good radical film and video documentary should be the same as those for good political journalism. This includes a thorough investigation, an understanding of the history and development of the matter being documented, and an honesty in presenting the living complexity of the situation and its politics. Clearly, the standards for a short agitational film or tape made to provoke discussion, emphasize an issue, or move people to a specific decision or action will be different than those for a long analytic work. Yet often extended radical works present simplistic and sanitized versions of their subject. For example, the popular “oral history” interview films—*Union Maids*, *With Babies and Banners*, and *Rosie the Riveter*—erase their interviewees’ connections with and sometimes actual membership in the Communist Party and other organizations. By reproducing anti-communist ideology, such works easily become co-opted, and their widespread use makes it that much harder to get audiences to remember facts that even conservative mainstream historians acknowledge—for example, that the initial CIO organizing drive was led by Communist organizers....

People often forget that the oppositional movement and its politics largely respond to the configuration of the dominant order and that as the established system changes, so will the resistance to it. Since World War II, the distinctive feature of successful radical movements has been their ability to link different kinds and aspects of oppression. This linking has come neither easily nor automatically, of course, but taking a long view of it, we can see a distinct difference between the Old Left’s raising of class issues, defined in fairly strictly conceived economic terms, and a still evolving contemporary radicalism which stresses the fundamental interrelation of class, race, and gender oppression within the context of an anti-imperialist consciousness and an insistence on social and cultural issues as well as economic ones. In fact, the most lively and effective left politics of our time emerges from coalitions which represent a range of interlocking concerns. In this context the substance and style of radical documentary must change to become more capable of working within a changing and evolving coalition. And makers, as well, need to be more flexible and able to work in a variety of ways, to fit different situations and possibilities.[3]

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Chuck was not averse to using firsthand knowledge and a personal anecdote to



Life in Oregon.



Oregon woods.



Oregon woods.

shore up his principled critique of *The War at Home* (Barry Brown and Glenn Silber, 1979), a documentary about campus uprisings in University of Wisconsin Madison (his alma mater) which he reproached for its simplistic present-centred concept of left community history and strategies:

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The film signals such an attitude, with 1963 newsreel footage depicting Madison as “the All-American town.” This setup makes the ensuing demonstration seem even more dramatic—protest just springing up like mushrooms after a shower. But even in this opening detail lies a major distortion. The state of Wisconsin has a long tradition of populism and founded the Progressive movement; industrial Milwaukee had socialist majors for most of the 20th century; Madison was a haven for radicals of all stripes during the McCarthy period; and the campus was a favorite of East Coast red diaper babies. In the late ‘50s and ‘60s a progressive campus ministry supported eating cooperatives, free university courses on social issues, avant-garde theatre, civil rights activism, and anti-nuke protest. (I speak from personal experience. As an undergrad at UW from ‘60-’64, I met ministers who had worked in San Francisco’s gay community and been on civil rights demonstrations in the South, academics who had traveled to post-revolutionary Cuba, Old Leftists’ children who had visited the USSR and took supplies to striking miners in Harlan County, grad students putting out the early New Left intellectual journal *Studies on the Left* and SNCC organizers fundraising for voter registration drives.)

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When writing about a Chicago friend and comrade’s work, Chuck dares to use words that were not exactly in the *Screen* lexicon, most importantly “love:”



Julia and JoAnn Elam.

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Similarly, JoAnn Elam’s *Everyday People* (in progress) portrays the work of letter carriers. The film constantly pivots around what workers find interesting, important, and rewarding about the job, and how management tries to control the worker. The soundtrack uses interviews, pop music hits, and a voice-over narrator explaining the official policy. The visual track consists of hand-held documentary footage of postal work, often edited in-camera with a rapid montage. The total effect is to provide an analysis which doubtlessly provides the best film documentary example of Harry Braverman’s contemporary Marxist classic, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. This analysis is framed within a context of frequent humor and obvious love for the job and for the letter carriers depicted.



With sister Christine and brother Jim.

Thirty years later I recruited Chuck again for a chapter in *Perils of Pedagogy*, the volume that I co-edited with Canadian colleagues Brenda Longfellow and Scott MacKenzie on John Greyson, the Canadian filmmaker whom Chuck had got to know as a *JC* contributor in 1984. Writing on two early Greyson works, solidarity documentaries respectively on the Sandinista revolution and Ontario farmworkers' struggles to unionize, Chuck delivered with a familiar truth-telling panache that had only enriched with the years:

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A single shot [from Greyson's Nicaragua-solidarity doc *Manzana par Manzana* can stand for a persistent problem. In one long shot a woman is shown washing clothes by hand and on a stone washboard next to a well. She is observed and looks back with an impassive regard, knowing she is being recorded, but there's no acknowledgment. The shot seems to imply that she wasn't spoken with in advance to set up the shot (certainly it could have been a much closer shot if agreement had been reached). She is observed from the outside, and a relation to the camera/cameraperson/viewer has not been established. As a result, we see a woman washing clothes by hand in a technically simple process. What the viewer can conclude, especially one from the cosmopolitan core, is that the woman's life is primitive and poor. A shot from the same sequence appears later in the film, with the addition of a man hauling water up from the well. What could have been suggested is this: a validation of the woman's domestic labour and her skill in washing (few gringos could wash even adequately that way—I speak from personal experience), or an examination of the issue of available, potable, running water. She probably can't wash at home, since there isn't running water available, so she either has to carry it there (and probably does for cooking) or in this case to come to the solitary water supply, the common well, wash the clothes, and carry them back home to dry. In other words, contained in this one shot of this one gesture is a whole material story of infrastructure development, of daily domestic labour, of the tourist's relation to the local resident, of what is at base, a power relationship.[4]

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Aside from the amusing image sparked by this account of a large pony-tailed gringo scrubbing his jeans on a stone slab, Chuck was an articulate and comprehensive pedagogue, activist, historian and critic all rolled into one!

This was not Chuck's only gesture of solidarity towards Canada. Once when I had translated and edited a fine piece on Quebec documentary for publication, he had had to fight off a couple of California editorial board members who deemed the subject a little too esoteric for *Jump Cut* readers.[5] A great friend of film scholars, makers and activists from Canada (and those from many other "minor cinemas,"), Chuck and *Jump Cut* published us all, from Greyson himself and Sara Halprin in the early days to my 21st-century doctoral students Evangelos Tziallas and Catherine Bernier who experienced their first major editing experience and reached their first audience through the orange site.

Chuck never got around to publishing a monograph, too busy facilitating, contributing to and critiquing everyone else's work (Is this the reason he retired from Northwestern as *Associate Prof*?) Yet his impact exceeds that of a dozen monographs within the academic publishing industrial complex. Everyone who cares about film, politics, social transformation and the role of the public intellectual, will support Chuck's comrade, partner, love of his life, and co-visionary-founder/co-editor-publisher, Julia Lesage, as she maintains and extends his legacy in this issue and those to come.





Images from *Postcards from Nicaragua*, a 1984 52-min. compilation video of works shot by Chuck Kleinhans in Nicaragua, where he and Julia Lesage taught video to Sandinista labor union videomakers. This tape can be seen on [Vimeo](#) or [Mediaburn](#).

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